Religion and Transformation

GTI Roundtable

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Religious systems of meaning, and the collective practices that derive from them, will either resist or propel efforts toward a more just and sustainable social order. Michael Karlberg offers a reconceptualization of religion as a partner for such a future. Our panelists discuss the role that religion, spirituality, and systems of meaning can play in social transformation.

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GREAT TRANSITION INITIATIVE
TOWARD A TRANSFORMATIVE VISION AND PRAXIS

Meaning, Religion, and a Great Transition

Michael Karlberg

Abstract: Systems of meaning—including the semiotic codes, ontological assumptions, and interpretive frames all people employ to make sense of the world—play a central role in processes of collective action and social change. Despite early modern predictions to the contrary, religion continues to provide such codes, assumptions, and frames for large numbers of people on every continent. As a consequence, religious systems of meaning, and the collective practices that derive from them, will either resist or propel efforts to construct a more just and sustainable social order. In order to foster the latter, a critical normative discourse on the contemporary role of religion is urgently needed. This discourse will need to articulate a set of rational, cosmopolitan standards by which religious thought and practice can be assessed and held to account. Toward this end, it is possible to conceptualize religion as an evolving system of knowledge and practice that, like science, entails a collective human endeavor to generate insights into reality and apply those insights to the betterment of the human condition. Indeed, modern science emerged only when a critical normative discourse began to clarify standards of legitimate scientific practice. A similar discourse is now needed regarding religious practice at this critical juncture in human history.

Introduction

The Great Transition Initiative recognizes that humanity is moving toward a planetary phase of civilization, driven by conditions of ever-increasing social and ecological interdependence. It accepts that the transitional period through which we are moving is characterized by two simultaneous processes: the gradual collapse of anachronistic social norms and institutions and the gradual emergence of new ones. In this context, it is promoting the emergence of a more just and sustainable social order characterized by human solidarity on a global scale. Toward this end, it envisions the need for a coherent global citizens movement as an essential systemic change agent. The core question before us is how to bring such a movement fully to life.[1]

Previous dialogues about this question have offered rich insights into the structural and institutional dimensions of a great transition and have explored related policy and design questions. What has received less attention, however, is the role that shared systems of meaning—or semiotic systems—will need to play in this process. Major structural and political changes will occur only with the emergence of larger systems of meaning that render them imaginable, desirable, and feasible. This is not to suggest that semiotic change precedes structural change in processes of social evolution. Change on both levels is dialectical as each influences the other. Therefore, we have to factor both into our analyses and actions.

Major structural changes will occur only with the emergence of larger systems of meaning that render them imaginable, desirable, and feasible.

Today, systems of meaning are generated from a number of institutional domains including families, schools, commercial media, partisan politics, and religion. This essay will focus on religion for several key reasons. First, religion has proven to be an exceptionally powerful mobilizing force that can reach to the roots of human motivation by endowing human agency with a transcendent meaning and purpose. Second, throughout history, as modes of social organization have become increasingly expansive and complex, revolutions in religious thought have frequently contributed to the transition from one order of social complexity to the next. Finally, religion remains a powerful force in the world today—for better and for worse—and this force needs to be reckoned with on the path toward a great transition.

Semiotic Codes, Assumptions, and Frames

Before grappling directly with the topic of religion, we should step back and examine the relevance that systems of meaning have to processes of social transformation. Take, for example, the concept of semiotic codes. Codes are rules of correspondence, or structured relationships, between elements in related systems or sets. For instance, the traditional Morse code used in early telegraphy determines which combinations of dots and dashes correspond to which letters of the alphabet. Linguistic codes determine which words correspond to which meanings in a given language. Similarly, genetic codes determine which combinations of nucleotides correspond to which amino acids in the production of proteins.

Codes are ubiquitous in human cultures. Indeed, all cultural systems can be analyzed in terms of their underlying codes.[2] Thus, we can speak of linguistic codes, behavioral codes, legal codes, traffic codes, dress codes, codes of ethics, and countless others that are embedded in diverse cultural systems. In turn, these cultural codes shape the consciousness of those who grow up within their matrix and internalize them, often unconsciously. In the process, they establish the rules of correspondence, or conventions, by which thought, talk, and action become mutually intelligible within a shared culture.

At a higher level of abstraction, all cultural codes can be viewed as rules of correspondence between signifiers (words, symbols, images, etc.), physical or social phenomena (things, behaviors, social practices, etc.), and the meanings we assign to them (thoughts, affective associations, value judgments, etc.).[3] These semiotic codes—or codes of meaning—can be relatively fixed for generations but become fluid and adaptive under changing conditions. In this sense, semiotic codes are analogous to the DNA of a given culture. They serve as a substrate for processes of social evolution. Like genetic codes, semiotic codes that are relatively adaptive or sustainable under one set of conditions can become maladaptive or unsustainable as conditions change.

Most relevant to a great transition are assumptions about the nature, meaning, and purpose of human existence.

Semiotic codes influence, in turn, the formation of more complex aggregates of meaning, including the ontological assumptions and interpretive frames that inform our perceptions and guide our social practices. Among the ontological assumptions that are most relevant to a great transition are assumptions about the nature, meaning, and purpose of human existence. Such assumptions constitute core elements of the systems of meaning that give rise to diverse social norms and practices, structures and policies, movements and causes. The transition to a more just and sustainable global civilization must occur, in part, at the level of these assumptions, which tend to be deeply maladaptive today.

For instance, if humans are presumed to be nothing more than intelligent and egoistic animals seeking to satisfy their material interests and appetites in an environment of scarce resources, with the meaning and purpose of our lives defined by success or failure in this regard—then how does the construction of a more just and sustainable global civilization become imaginable or desirable? And what would motivate the struggle and sacrifice required to bring it about?

Likewise, if humans are presumed to be living out transitory lives en route to a destination of eternal salvation or damnation, and if this earthly existence is nothing more than a way of separating the saved from the damned, and if the entire process is about to reach an apocalyptic conclusion—then how does the construction of a more just and sustainable global civilization become imaginable or desirable? And what would motivate the struggle and sacrifice required to bring it about?

Or if humans are presumed to be limitless in their capacity for technological innovation and rational in their application of that capacity, and if technological innovations can ultimately solve any problems humans will ever face, and if our continued existence as a species is little more than a set of social and ecological engineering problems that will be solved by an elite scientific class—then how does the construction of a more just and sustainable global civilization become imaginable or desirable? And what would motivate the struggle and sacrifice required to bring it about?

There are, of course, many other assumptions about the nature, meaning, and purpose of human life at play in the world today, including many that are more thoughtful than the thumbnail sketches above. But each of the widely held assumptions outlined illustrates the profound role that such assumptions play in systems of meaning that will either resist or propel any movement toward a more just and sustainable global order. Thus, a great transition entails, in part, a semiotic transition in underlying assumptions about human nature and the codes that inform them.

A great transition must also occur at the level of overarching interpretive frames.

Similarly, a great transition must also occur at the level of overarching interpretive frames. Interpretive frames are mental structures that shape our perceptions of reality, organize our experience, and provide normative guides for our actions.[4] They are, in effect, a form of conceptual scaffolding on which we rely to construct our understanding of the world. Like window frames, they determine what is included and excluded in our consideration. Like building frames, they organize and provide coherence to our movement through life.

For instance, one of the dominant macro-social interpretive frames today builds on the aforementioned assumption that human nature is fundamentally self-interested and that the purpose of our lives is to pursue our material interests in an environment of scarce resources. Society, within this frame, is a competitive arena in which individuals or groups vie for material goods, social status, and power. The best way to organize society, its logic suggests, is to harness everyone's self-interested energy and direct it toward the maximum social benefit. This goal is pursued by organizing virtually every social institution as a contest in which truth, excellence, innovation, efficiency, or productivity will prevail. Thus, a culture of contest is prescribed for our classrooms, cultivated in our markets, reinforced in our congresses and parliaments, re-asserted in our courtrooms, and even embodied in many systems of recreation and leisure. Although such contests inevitably produce winners and losers, the logic of this frame suggests that, in the long run, (surviving) populations will be better off.

The historical dynamic of this social-contest frame is now playing out on a global stage in relations among nation-states and other global actors such as powerful multinational corporations. Whatever its viability in the past, or whatever advantages it has conferred on some social classes, this frame is becoming deeply maladaptive and unsustainable under conditions of rapidly increasing social and ecological

interdependence across the planet.[5] Humanity cannot solve the problems it now faces within the same logic that gave rise to these problems.

The Question of Religion

Religion has been a primary cause of semiotic stasis in many populations for extended periods of time throughout history. Yet it has also been one of the primary drivers of semiotic transformation at critical moments in history. This is, in part, because religion has the power to recode systems of meaning that have prevailed for centuries, and, in the process, it can establish ontological assumptions and interpretive frames that give new meaning and purpose to human agency. Therefore, if our efforts to effect a great transition are to be informed by an analysis of the semiotic dimensions of this transition, we need to wrestle with both the negative and positive contributions that religion might make.

For generations, modernist thinkers have tended to view religion as an anachronistic social construct that would inevitably be replaced with purely secular belief systems with the advance of modernity. However, this "secularization thesis" is now being challenged by mounting evidence to the contrary.[6] Religion remains a potent force in human affairs on every continent—shaping semiotic codes, influencing assumptions about human nature, and framing conceptions of society and progress. Indeed, the vast majority of the earth's inhabitants continue to draw meaning and inspiration from religion, and any movement with global aspirations needs to consider this relatively universal human impulse.

Any movement with global aspirations needs to consider this relatively universal human impulse.

Moreover, despite the resurgence of religious fanaticism in the news today, religion has made vital contributions to many progressive social movements in the past two centuries. Religious concepts, ideals, commitments, and organizational capacities have been major drivers of the abolition movements, suffrage movements, labor movements, independence movements, civil rights and anti-apartheid movements, peace movements, humanitarian assistance movements, solidarity movements, and truth and reconciliation movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[7] And, today, they are increasingly being allied to environmental causes.[8] They have also been a primary source, for centuries, of non-violent strategies to overcome oppression.[9] We are thus seeing the emergence of a growing body of "post-secular" scholarship that is taking a more nuanced look at the complex and ongoing role of religion at this critical juncture in history.[10]

At the same time, organized religion has all too frequently been corrupted and abused by political and economic interests that pervert its accomplishments and distort its ends, foster superstition and blind imitation, set religion at odds with science and reason, and breed sectarian conflict and violence. In addition, religious belief and practice has frequently been characterized by the uncritical transmission of inherited cultural prejudices and oppressive social norms. Therefore, the concept of religion is, itself, in need of a great transition. As with every social institution, our

understanding and practice of religion must evolve in order for it to make an ongoing contribution to the advancement of civilization.

Reconceptualizing Religion

With this understanding in mind, let us explore a series of critical normative questions regarding the nature and role of religion in the contemporary world. How can religion contribute to the emergence of a global citizens movement and the construction of a more just and sustainable global order? How can it contribute to the semiotic transition this implies? How can religion, itself, be understood and practiced in a progressive and evolving manner that aligns with these ends? And how might such an approach to religion be fostered, as widely as possible, at this critical juncture in human history?

It is possible to conceptualize religion as an evolving system of knowledge and practice.

From a normative standpoint, it is possible to conceptualize religion as an evolving system of knowledge and practice that, much like science, embodies a collective human endeavor to generate insights regarding significant dimensions of reality and apply those insights to the betterment of the human condition.[11] There are, of course, significant differences between the two systems. For instance, science explores aspects of the material universe such as the laws of physics or the process and products of biological evolution. Religion, on the other hand, explores less tangible aspects of reality such as the purpose and meaning of human life, the values and ideals that might guide individual and collective human agency, the latent potentialities of the human spirit, and the means by which we might actualize those potentialities on both individual and collective levels.

Of course, some of these latter questions are also explored in various branches of philosophy, literature, and the arts—all of which have made significant contributions to human progress over the centuries. What distinguishes religion, however, is faith in a set of underlying ontological premises and commitment to acting on them in various ways.[12] These tend to include variations on several key themes. There is a spiritual dimension to reality that cannot be investigated through purely empirical or philosophical methodologies. Reality, in both its material and spiritual dimensions, has a Source, a First Cause, a Supreme Animating Will or Power that embodies a pre-ontological level of being from which every aspect of the reality we experience emanates. The principle of causality can, itself, be understood as an emanation of this pre-ontological Essence—as can all of the governing dynamics, or underlying laws, of the known universe.

In this framework, science and religion can be seen as systems of knowledge and practice by which we can gradually gain deeper insights into the governing dynamics of the reality that emanates from this Animating Will. Among these governing dynamics are highly tangible mechanical forces that have been well understood for centuries as well as relatively intangible material forces, such as electromagnetic forces, which humans have only begun to comprehend and harness in recent

centuries. These governing dynamics also include highly intangible spiritual forces, such as the powers of love, compassion, and justice, of which we have only a dim understanding at present, and which we still have much to learn about harnessing for the betterment of humanity. Nonetheless, the essence of human nature—the human spirit or the rational soul—responds to these spiritual forces even if we do not adequately understand them, just as human bodies have always responded to forces such as gravity, regardless of whether we understood those forces. We can, of course, try to ignore such forces, but we do so at our own peril.

Within this perspective, religion, as a system of knowledge and practice, can be understood as a major means by which humanity has explored and learned to harness these spiritual forces and understand their implications for the meaning and purpose of human life. There are, of course, other ways to view religion in the world today—ranging from dismissal of it as an anachronistic social construct to insistence that one religious community possesses the exclusive and final truth. However, such polarizing and triumphalist conceptions are incompatible with the transition to a global order characterized by inclusivity and solidarity. What is needed, then, is a constructive conception of religion that provides normative standards of religious practice in relation to the emergence of a more just and sustainable global civilization.

We need a critical normative discourse about what constitutes the progressive and constructive practice of religion.

The normative conception of religion alluded to above is, of course, an ideal to foster rather than a description of all that has occurred in the name of religion. Much religious practice has fallen far short of this ideal. But so has the practice of science fallen short of contemporary scientific standards. The history of science includes naive assertions, cultural prejudices, theoretical biases, spurious claims, self-interested corruptions, and perverted abuses. At this moment in history, however, what distinguishes science is an ongoing, rigorous, global, evolving discourse about what constitutes science, along with an evolving set of standards and rules of conduct that are applied, however imperfectly at times, to all who claim to be engaged in science. Based on those standards and requirements, valid science is, over time, increasingly distinguished from what we now view as pseudoscience or junk science.

If we look at religion in a somewhat analogous manner, we see the urgent need at this pivotal moment in history for a critical normative discourse about what constitutes the progressive and constructive practice of religion—or how religious practice can best be aligned with the transition to a more just and sustainable global order. Only through such discourse can we articulate standards that can be applied to all those who claim to be engaged in religion. Only thus can religion become a consistent force of social progress as spurious claims to religion are exposed for what they are: the prejudices, corruptions, and abuses of ignorant or self-interested actors invoking the name of religion in order to satisfy their egos or support their desire for power and privilege.

This is not, it should be noted, a sectarian argument that seeks to exalt any one religious tradition over others. On the contrary, all of the world's great religious

traditions contain within them spiritual principles, humanitarian ideals, and altruistic commitments that can align with, and support, the transition to a global civilization. In this regard, there is value in focusing, for analytical purposes, on *religion* as a singular, universal, trans-historical phenomenon rather than *religions* as competing traditions or frameworks. Indeed, this is similar to the way we now think of *science* as a singular analytical construct that encompasses the many disciplinary frameworks, or *sciences*, within it.

Moreover, this shift in how we understand religion requires us to start separating religion, conceptually, from the cultural milieus in which specific religions emerged—in the same way we now do for science.[13] Today, we no longer speak in terms of European sciences, or Islamic sciences, or Chinese sciences because we understand that the physical universe is one reality and, therefore, science—the means by which we systematically investigate that reality—must be understood as one global enterprise. Similarly, if there is a transcendent spiritual reality, then it, too, must be one reality. Therefore, religion, if it is understood as the means by which we systematically investigate that reality, must be understood as one global enterprise. Stated another way, science reached a stage of relative maturity only when it began to free itself from culturally inherited biases and limitations. Why should religion be any different? And how can the transition to a more peaceful, just, and sustainable global order be possible unless and until the vast majority of human beings on this planet, who remain religious, begin to redefine their understanding of religion in this way?

There is value in focusing on religion as a singular, universal, trans-historical phenomenon.

Holding Religion to Account

Fortunately, if one listens to religious discourse with discerning ears, one can hear that the process of redefinition has already begun, is gathering momentum, and needs to be strongly encouraged and systematically advanced as an essential contribution to a great transition. With this in mind, what are some of the standards and requirements we might begin to apply to the understanding and practice of religion?

First, if religion is understood as a system of knowledge and practice that seeks insight into spiritual reality and applies that insight to improving the human condition, then one condition it would need to satisfy is that it be practiced in a thoughtful, intelligent, and rational manner complementary to and harmonious with science. Religion must grow beyond dogmatic and narrow-minded assertions of truth and adopt instead a posture of systematic learning. This is not to deny the profound body of insights, often expressed in rich metaphorical language, which can be gleaned from diverse religious traditions. Rather, it suggests the need for humility in the interpretation of religious texts, coupled with rational methods for the ongoing generation of knowledge regarding how to apply spiritual insights to the betterment of humanity. These rational methods might include, for instance, a dialogical and reflective approach to inquiry, grounded in constructive social action, which draws on diverse perspectives and experiences within evolving frameworks of understanding built upon ethical commitments and altruistic ideals.

Another condition religion would need to satisfy at this moment in history is suggested by the increasing global interdependence humanity is experiencing, along with the increasing fragility of social and ecological systems under mounting stress from our recent reproductive and technological course as a species. In this context, religion can recognize and promote the systemic unity and interdependence—the organic oneness—of humanity. Indeed, the Latin root of the word religion—*ligare*—implies binding or connecting people in community. At this critical juncture in history, this must begin to occur at the level of our global human community. Such a conception of religion provides an overarching interpretive frame within which the nature of human society and the trajectory of social evolution can be understood—and within which the generation of practical knowledge regarding the betterment of the human condition can occur.

A closely related condition religion would need to satisfy is that the generation of knowledge be premised on a normative conception of human nature that is compatible with a just and sustainable global order, or with the promotion of the organic oneness of humanity. In this regard, it is possible to conceive of the human being as having a twofold purpose: to develop one's latent individual capacity as a means to, and in the process of, contributing to the advancement of civilization. Such a conception imbues human nature, and human agency, with a meaning that is coherent with the exigencies of the age in which we live while, at the same time, reinforcing the noblest insights and commitments of all religious traditions.

Religion can recognize and promote the systemic unity and interdependence of humanity.

This underlying premise regarding the twofold purpose of human life, understood within the overarching social frame of organic oneness, offers a basis for the semiotic transition alluded to at the outset of this essay. Together, they offer a holistic view of the individual and society, co-evolving in a dialectical manner, with individual and collective well-being inextricably linked. Within this framework, normative concepts such as progress, justice, prosperity, sustainability, education, and empowerment—and all other normative concepts—begin to take on new meanings that reflect the needs of the age in which we live.[14] Stated another way, within this framework, a more adaptive semiotic code begins to emerge, as familiar concepts are recoded with new meaning from which new social practices emerge.

A Response to Skeptics

Skeptics might still ask why religion should have any role. What about the religious fanaticism that we see in the news today or that we read about in our history books? Is secular humanism not the only rational way to bring about a great transition?

In response, it is important to acknowledge that religious violence and fanaticism are very real. At the same time, it is equally important to acknowledge that today's news media tend to amplify the most dramatic, disturbing, and polarizing expressions of religion while obscuring the way the vast majority of religious people live, practice their faith, and quietly contribute to the betterment of society. The stories we tend to

tell in our history books likewise focus disproportionately on the drama and conflict of history rather than the quiet contributions to progress that countless thoughtful people—including religious people—have made. So the contemporary perception and historical memory of religion created by these sources tends to be deeply biased toward the corruptions and abuses of religion.

In contrast, these same institutional sources of contemporary perception and historical memory frequently ignore corruptions and abuses of science. For instance, in just the last century, the natural sciences have given us eugenics, apocalyptic weapons of mass destruction, the toxification of every landscape on the planet, the enclosure of genetic resources, the engineering of suicide genes, and the destabilization of global climatic systems. Meanwhile, the social and behavioral sciences have provided a theoretical bulwark for growing economic disparities destabilizing the global economy, along with sophisticated methods of mass manipulation that have fostered an unsustainable consumer culture and a dysfunctional political culture. Science has also created its own modern priesthood that has alienated the masses of humanity from participating in meaningful ways in the enterprise of knowledge generation. Children are sorted, from primary school, into a small fraction who are allegedly capable of contributing to the generation of knowledge, and a vast majority who will be mere consumers of that knowledge and who should trust science's priestly class to look after their interests. And that priestly scientific class even has its own gender hierarchies and sexual abuse scandals which are systemic and widespread.

The positive development of science has been spurred on by an ongoing discourse regarding the legitimate practice of science.

The point here is not to diminish the importance of science or its central contribution to human progress. But the positive development of science has been spurred on by an ongoing normative discourse regarding the legitimate practice of science. That discourse needs to be taken to the next level because science is in a relative state of systemic crisis—even though this is seldom recognized by scientists. The examples cited above are only part of the problem. The crisis can also be seen in the underlying political economy of science today. It can be seen, for instance, in the ways scientists obtain funding and receive promotions; in the basic questions they ask or do not ask as a result; in the increasingly reductionist nature of most scientific research; in the privatization of much scientific knowledge; in the systemic biases built into peer-reviewed scientific publishing; and in the ways most scientific training focuses narrowly on methodological technique while ignoring deeper questions and concerns that pertain to the scientific enterprise.

There are, of course, many excellent scientists who conduct their work in ethical and thoughtful ways, and there is much excellent science contributing to the advancement of civilization. But contemporary science, as a system influenced by powerful social forces, often lacks critical reflexivity, and is often uninformed by a wider social and ecological consciousness. Furthermore, as the brief sketch above illustrates, these problems play out not merely at the level of the applied sciences

and technologies. The contemporary crisis of science as-a-whole is inseparable from the global crises with which so many thoughtful people are concerned today. This is because the crisis in science reflects its increasing privatization, industrialization, and commercialization into a self-serving system inextricably tied to the political economy of today's maladaptive social order.

Clearly, both religion and science, as systems of inquiry and practice, are susceptible to ignorance, bias, corruption, and abuse. This is because both systems are practiced by human beings within social contexts. Moreover, if we could conduct a complete accounting for all of the problems we face in the world today, it might even be the case that science has greater culpability in terms of its ultimate effect—given its increasingly deleterious impact on the global ecosystems that sustain human life itself. But this is not an argument for less science. It is an argument for more critical normative discourse regarding the practice of science, and religion, at this critical juncture in history when all inherited social institutions and practices urgently need to be re-examined.

Both religion and science, as systems of inquiry and practice, are susceptible to ignorance, bias, corruption, and abuse.

Another important answer can be found in the post-secular scholarship mentioned at the outset of this essay. Assessed according to its own predictions, the secularization thesis has clearly failed. Religion is not disappearing in the modern age, and it has actually made central contributions to the project of modernity at every stage—despite the fanaticism that also occurs in its name.[15] One reason for the continued vitality of religion is that, at its best, religion enables humans to grapple in meaningful ways with universal and existential questions that cannot be ignored but are beyond the scope of science. Moreover, in the process, religion can reach the roots of human motivation and prompt the will to struggle—and the willingness to make personal sacrifices—for the betterment of the human condition. These capacities, along with the recoding of normative concepts with new meanings, lie outside the domain of science. For most people living today, religion continues to be a major source of normative understanding and commitment. Thus, it appears to have a significant role to play in a great transition. The question is whether that role will be progressive or regressive – and what we can do to foster the former.

This does not mean, of course, that the advancement of civilization—or a great transition—is coterminous with the development of religion itself. Systemic transition is a complex process in which the most thoughtful approaches to science and the most thoughtful approaches to religion each have a role and in which people who identify as secular and people who identify as religious can and must work shoulder to shoulder to achieve common ends.

Is this a plausible scenario? Yes. All of the developments described above can already be discerned in the contemporary world, where many intelligent and productive scientists hold thoughtful religious commitments; where countless people from diverse secular and religious backgrounds have no trouble working side by side for common ends; and where rising generations of young people are transforming

religious thought and practice itself in ecumenical, intelligent, cosmopolitan, and forward-looking ways—even if their efforts do not make the six o'clock news. Moreover, the conception of religion as an evolving system of knowledge and practice, as discussed above, is emerging in religious discourse today.[16] If skeptics fail to recognize these emerging realities, it is because they choose to ignore them or to engage in highly selective and prejudicial readings of their wider social reality.

Consider the Alternatives

In contrast to the scenario above, characterized by constructive engagement with religion, consider the futility of ongoing efforts to ignore or extinguish religious impulses and commitments. Such efforts, at best, have never succeeded. At worst, they resemble the stridency and the proselyting zealotry that characterizes divisive forms of religious fundamentalism, which polarize and alienate people rather than bind them together in community. In essence, such efforts become an expression of secular fundamentalism, rooted in ontological premises that are neither more nor less provable or rational than thoughtful versions of the spiritual premises to which they set themselves in opposition.

Neither secular nor religious intolerance constitutes a viable path to global human solidarity.

Neither secular nor religious intolerance constitutes a viable path to global human solidarity. Would it not be more productive and universally empowering to foster the ongoing evolution and refinement of religion as a system of knowledge and practice focused on questions of human meaning and purpose and on the practical means for actualizing latent human potentialities? And can this not be encouraged either from the position of an active participant or a sympathetic secular observer?

Further, if we consider other major semiotic forces in the world today, we see additional reasons to take religion seriously. Foremost among these forces is the vast system of advertising and marketing that now dominates human consciousness in many regions of the world and is rapidly colonizing the rest. This system has learned how to exploit the universal human need for meaning and purpose and bend it toward the ends of consumer stimulation and profit maximization. Indeed, as one prominent semiotic scholar has demonstrated, the contemporary system of advertising is aggressively seeking to displace religion as the primary system of meaning in the modern world.[17] The conception of human nature this commercially-motivated system propagates is of a creature driven by insatiable appetites, needs, and desires that can only be met through spending, acquisition, entertainment, and consumption. It frames society as an arena of competitive pleasure seeking, status attainment, and satisfaction fulfillment. Within this matrix, the semiotic codes that have emerged are deeply maladaptive on psychological, social, and ecological levels.

Another powerful semiotic force in the world today is partisan politics and the system of political marketing to which it has given rise—a system that directly parallels consumer marketing in the growing sophistication of its semiotic strategies and techniques. In this sphere, we see increasingly polarizing discourse comprising us-

against-them identity constructs, mud-slinging, simplistic slogans, and endless public posturing informed by crass electoral calculations. The reactionary policy proposals, short-term planning horizons, nationalism, and partisan gridlock that often result are as deeply maladaptive as the culture of consumerism—while the underlying assumptions about human nature and the over-arching social frames are remarkably similar.

The contemporary systems of consumer capitalism and partisan politics are becoming increasing inseparable in many regions of the world. They each embody and reinforce the same underlying competitive logic, which aligns with the narrow short-term interests of the most powerful segments of society.[18] In effect, they have merged into a single political-economic system—with variations on the same theme playing out in an increasing number of countries. This integrated political economy is, in turn, characterized by a largely consistent semiotic code that is becoming one of the most influential systems of meaning on the planet today. It is rivaled in its influence only by religion.

We need to encourage the ongoing evolution and refinement of religion as a partner in a growing global citizens movement

In this context, efforts to foster and encourage the ongoing evolution and refinement of religion, and to recognize it as a partner in a growing global citizens movement, seem well founded. We would do well then to consider the practical questions that follow. How can this best be accomplished? What can we contribute as individuals—whether secular or religious? What collective actions can we take within our organizations or communities? And what role, if any, can the Great Transition Initiative play in such efforts?

Endnotes

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12. It is important to note that faith is not an exclusive characteristic of religion. The entire enterprise of science, from its outset, also rested on articles of faith. These included faith that the physical universe is characterized by an underlying order and faith that the human mind can discover this order over time, through the right methods of investigation. Neither premise was verifiable at the outset of the enterprise; indeed, they would have appeared to contradict most people's experience of the world as highly chaotic, unpredictable, and unexplainable. Moreover, scientists continue to operate on faith in a wide range of premises that underlie the programs of research to which they devote their lives, some of which prove valid over time while others do not. So faith, itself, is not a distinguishing feature of religion, and only the most naïve conceptions of science fail to recognize its generative and ongoing role in the scientific enterprise. Therefore, what distinguishes religion is faith in a specific set of ontological premises regarding the existence of a spiritual reality that transcends the physical universe. This does not deny, of course, the central role of skepticism and critical thought in science. But we should not have a naïve understanding of how they operate within science—as Thomas Kuhn, Imra Lakatos, and many other philosophers and historians of science have documented.

13. For sociologists, the implication here is that while Durkheim's conception of religion (and the sociological approach to religious studies it spawned) may have had some merit as a historical description of culturally-embedded and ritualized religious practices, it does not offer an adequate normative basis for understanding contemporary religion in the context of a great transition humanity is moving toward. Moreover, given that Durkheim's secularization thesis has not been supported by its own predictions, it would seem timely to at least question Durkheim's underlying assumptions. Most prominent among these are the assumptions that there is no transcendent spiritual reality and that religion is merely a functional social construct without any deeper ontological basis.

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18. Karlberg, *Beyond the Culture of Contest*.

About the Author

Michael Karlberg is Professor of Communication Studies at Western Washington University. His research and activism focus on the need to move beyond the prevailing culture of conflict and competition in order to establish a more just and sustainable social order based on recognition of the organic oneness of humanity. He is the author of numerous books, including *Beyond the Culture of Contest*; *Reframing Discourses for Peace and Justice*; *Discourse, Identity, and Global Citizenship*; *Discourse Theory and Peace*; *The Paradox of Protest in a Culture of Contest*; and *Constructive Resilience: The Bahá'í Response to Oppression in Iran*. He holds a Ph.D. in Communication from Simon Fraser University.

Roundtable

Christoph Bals

If religion is defined as belief in a supernatural, interventionist god, I would consider myself an atheist. But for me, this children's belief is not at all a necessary condition to be religious. What on earth, then, could be a good reason to claim to be religious if you don't believe in an agent that can act in the world separately from human beings or at least can modify their actions in a desirable way?

1. As a starting point which might be acceptable for actors who consider themselves in religious terms as "non-musical" (to use Jürgen Habermas's term), I want to give religion an instrumental definition. We can see religion as a very powerful instrument to foster cooperation. We know today from game theory, from evolution theory, from developmental research and child language acquisition, that human beings are very special social animals. Michael Tomasello gathered evidence to prove that humans share two unique abilities: reading intentions and interacting with others socially. Reading intentions leads to understanding and acquiring linguistic symbols, because "learning and use of symbols requires understanding that a partner can voluntarily direct actions and attentions to outside entities." This shows intentional action can be made by humans as long as they have a goal. Intentional action is how an organism acts so as to bring reality (as it perceives it) into line with its goals. A person wants to achieve a desired outcome and must perform an action to achieve this desired outcome. Depending on the end result, another action may or may not take place. In this sense, I would see religion as a powerful tool to define goals that determine action which change perception which again determines action.

But cooperation has two sides; it isn't necessarily "good." Very often, religion only supports cooperation of a limited group of people and excludes the broader co-world. Negative sides of religion—religious wars, terror against non-believers, and religion as a weapon for different state ideologies—are a logical consequence of this religious underpinning of cooperation against others.

And if you belief that God is on your side, you might be able to do the most terrible things, even with pride. Look at the bible: when most Moses came back with the ten commandments of his God, the first thing was to organize the killing of others who were not seen as part of his group.

On the other hand, religion has also played a strong role in foster co-operation towards the "good," and there are indeed many examples of this positive influence: Dietrich Bonhoefer, Mahatma Gandhi, Desmond Tutu, among others.

2. Based on these considerations, I want to bring the relation of science and religion into a historical perspective. I want to connect it to the theorem of the "Axial Age" of Karl Jaspers and the new discussion of this theorem by Jürgen Habermas. The basis of the Axial Age is the observation that we have seen in a number of relatively independent cultural regions in the relatively short period from 800 to 200 BCE very important philosophical, religious, and technical developments. All of those are still very relevant today. In China, where the teachings of Confucius and Laozi, among others, played an important role, different paths of Chinese philosophy were created. In India, the teachings of Buddha had a big effect while the natural philosophy and the older Upanishads of Hinduism have been already influential since 800 to 600 BCE. In Israel biblical prophets—Elijah, Elisha, Amos, Hosea, Micah in the eighth century BCE; Isaiah in the seventh.; Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Huldah, Nahum, Habakkuk, in the sixth; Ezekiel, Second Isaiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Third Isaiah in the fifth and later—were an innovative voice. From 521 to 516 BCE, the second temple in Jerusalem was built and the community got a new foundation, supported by Haggai and Zechariah. In Iran, Zarathustra was in the seventh or sixth century BCE the founder of a new religion based on the perceived struggle between the good (Aša/Arta) and the ill (Druj/Drauga). In Greece, the Iliad and the Odyssey (around 750 BCE), the natural philosophers in the first half of the sixth century (Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes), and then Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle in the fifth and fourth century laid the basic foundation of the European-Occidental perspective. Cicero and Seneca built in Rome on this development.

Those innovative developments in different cultures had, according to Jaspers, a fundamental influence on all following civilizations and the categories of our thinking.
Why do I spell all of this out?

a) I think it is important to put our debate in a bigger context and to escape the trap of Europe and US-centrists.

b) This perspective of those parallel developments in different cultures gives us the opportunity to look in a broader context at the development of philosophical/scientific systems on the one hand side and religious systems on the other. This historical context allows us to think about different but important roles of philosophical and scientific thinking in contrast to the role of religion.

From my perspective, it is a categorical mistake to describe religion as a knowledge system. To use a term of Wittgenstein, religion is a different language game ("Sprachspiel"). Religion is not an alternative source of knowledge; it doesn't present statements about the real word which are justifiably true. We shouldn't go the road of fundamentalist actors who don't consider the different "grammar" of the different language games. It is interesting to see how many so-called religious actors don't differentiate between the different language games of science and religion. All attempts to use religion to drive climate denial, for instance, are a form of this categorical mistake. (And often non-religious actors don't differentiate between those language games either).

In my eyes, religion is not a knowledge system, but a system which searches for cooperative goals and motivates people to strive towards this end. Different religions have developed very strong pictures to motivate people. And one role of spirituality is to integrate cooperative objectives into personal structures—as we know today inscribed into the own brain.

Look at three different language systems:

Morality can tell us why we have to limit climate change and stop mass extinction.

Science can tell us (based on probabilities) what the consequences will be if we don't act. It cannot tell us why we should limit global warming and stop mass extinction. But it can inform us how we can do so.

Religion can motivate many actors who will not be motivated by morality (why) and science (how) alone.

Of course, much more can be said regarding the possible interaction and potential conflicts between science and religion. Karlberg's idea of holding "religion to account" in the way that corporations and governments are held to account is an interesting one in this context.

c) Different religions create different path dependencies for rationalizing the strong motivating pictures. As an example, a lot of strong pictures and intuitions of the Christian and Buddhist religions became a source of inspirations for science, political theory, and social theory. They were translated into a language that extended beyond the members of the religion itself. The biblical picture that man has been created in the image of God as well as the strong role of this picture to move human rights forward had a strong influence.

It is interesting to see that rationality based on the attempts to rationalize pictures and language from the Jewish-Christian tradition has underpinned different scientific traditions. The Buddhist tradition got rationalized in a very different direction than the Christian tradition, as we can see especially in differing conceptions of time.

3. It is quite obvious that my arguments brought forward so far will not be acceptable to many religious actors. They might say, "A functional definition of religion is interesting, but is this all we can say about religion?" No, it is not.

It is very little what science can say about love. But as an old religious song says, "ubi caritas et amor, deus ibi est." Strongly connected with this— and including the ecological co-world—is the metaphor of "organic oneness," which can be understood as a primary meme or archetypical concept of his perspective. So god might also be a metaphor that the whole is more than sum of parts. Yes, we know this from quantum physics. But how many people are motivated by this knowledge? If religious spirituality allows us to experience this interconnectedness, this can motivate us, as do other similar resonant experiences, like those in nature.

To clarify, I am not speaking about a supernatural force. But I strongly believe that we need strong cooperation to move the Great Transition forward. Religion can be a problem; it can also be a partner. In both cases, we have to deal with it. It will not disappear.

About the Author

Christoph Bals is the Executive Director of Policy at the NGO Gemanwatch, where he was a founding member in 1991. He was among the initiators of European Business Council for Sustainable Energy, the pro-Kyoto-campaign "e-mission55," and the initiative for climate conscious flying "atmosfair." He has been on the board of the Foundation for Sustainability since 1998. He has been one of the three NGO-representatives in the German government's working group on emission trading (AGE) since 1998, and he is a member of the advisory group of most ambitious German green investment index (NAI). In 2003 and 2004, he was in the National Advisory Committee for the Renewables 2004. Bals headed various successful campaigns (e.g., Rio Konkret and the Climate Responsibility Campaign). Bals studied theology, economics, and philosophy in Munich, Belfast, Erfurt, and Bamberg.

Kurt Grimm

Michael Karlberg's essay raised important issues and attracted divergent comments, including some that strongly diminished the past contributions and future potentials for organized religion to contribute to a Great Transition. This comment refutes some ill-founded anti-religious perspectives with evidence from history, and suggests that deep institutionalization—occurring in religious and non-religious organizations—may exacerbate many social maladies while suppressing innovation and collaboration towards great social achievement.

Four points are relevant in this regard:

First, anti-religious sentiments—whether subtle, implicit or explicitly stated—are commonplace, in many scholarly communities and well beyond. In some of these communities, religion is dismissed or parodied; its role in human lives, social process, and history is often diminished and/or widely ignored, sometimes in cavalier tones. Such comments and presumptions were evident in this dialogue; the scarcity of a stern rebuke or challenge to such presumption is also notable, particularly given the magnitude of contradictory evidence.

To sum in a sentence, history reveals that organized religions and "religious people" have made great contributions to human progress ranging from the abolition of slavery and child labor to women's suffrage and the founding of many charities, orphanages, hospitals, and universities.

Throughout the history of Western civilization, one finds idealistic roots, moral propulsion, and individual-to-collective courage rooted in religious convictions. The same applies to many twentieth century leaders of great social change, including Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Furthermore, any reasonable historian must conclude that the Enlightenment itself was substantially propelled by men who employed empirical methods as a lens for exploration, worship, and veneration of Deity (e.g. Newton's deep religiosity).

Second, many people, billions of humans in fact, find great meaning, purpose, and usefulness in the culture and experience of "religion." Many rich and vibrant cultures find direction and expression through religion. Warts and all, religion is a vehicle for community, culture, and tradition, within shared lives of respect, purpose, and dignity.

Third, some religious people/groups hate and degrade other people, commit atrocities, and/or engage in bloody conflicts with people bearing different religious ideologies. Same goes for people and groups that are not religious.

Fourth, if religion exists and religious people act badly, it is wrong to conclude that religion is bad. The common denominator between evil and great evil is not religion: it is people. More specifically, the common denominator among evils of various sort committed by religious institutions (colonialism, cultural genocide, institutionalized degradation, etc.) is perhaps not religion, but the institutionalization of religion.

In this context, it is important to examine the histories of diverse evils occurring within non-religious institutions. For prominent examples of deep institutionalization of secular-to-atheist sorts, consider Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, and Mao Zedong. Note their secular and intelligent rationales. For example, examine Marx and *Mein Kampf*, and notice how a sensible Darwinism morphed into social Darwinism, eugenics, and deeply institutionalized mass murder.

To close, let's agree that selfish and hateful sentiments exist in every human heart. Let's agree that their scope and scale is enlarged by and within many institutions, religious and otherwise. I suggest that the discernment between religion and religious institutionalism is vital to a Great Transition. In fact, clear discernment of a post-institutional worldview may be the driver and defining signature of the better tomorrow that we individually and collectively aspire after. This is not to endorse anarchy or the abolition of institutions, but a clear discernment of where institutionalization permits—and perhaps exacerbates—social pathologies while diminishing individual creativity and social imagination.

About the Author

Kurt Grimm was an Associate Professor in the Department of Earth, Ocean & Atmospheric Sciences at the University of British Columbia. From a foundation in Earth systems science and applied ecology, he became specifically interested in the origins of patterning in the real world, and worked on developing a simple unified description of phenomena in the natural world that deliver broad explanatory power and explicit testability. His research interests included self-organizing complexity, environmental and planetary Earth sciences, transformative sustainability learning, and A Unified Description of Life (AUDOL).

Michelle Holliday

I wholeheartedly agree with Michael Karlberg's premise that our systems of meaning—"the semiotic codes, ontological assumptions, and interpretive frames all people employ to make sense of the world"—must be thoughtfully evolved if humanity is to make the Great Transition we so desperately need. This is the premise behind system scientist Donella Meadows' assertion that the most powerful leverage point in a system is the guiding paradigm. I especially appreciate his acknowledgement that new actions and new narratives must be pursued in tandem, each informing the other. And at the same time, there is special importance in inviting an evolved framing narrative, since it then opens up new imaginings, new possibilities, new motivation for action.

Where Karlberg's proposal raises concerns for me is in its implied focus on actively driving the reconcepualization of religion through a focused discourse, rather than supporting its emergence. Though the etymology and the core intent of religion is to bind us together, the scope of that "binding together" has generally been limited to others practicing the same religion. In this way, religion has tended to inform our individual identities and sense of distinction more than it has been a universally unifying force.

This is precisely what compels Karlberg to propose a discourse to reconceptualize religion in search of universal and unifying principles. But my concern is that such a direct—and potentially directive—approach seems fraught with the risk of provoking defensiveness, debate, and distraction from the goal of the initiative. The risk of strife is not reason to avoid an important discourse. But there may be alternative—or even parallel and complementary—paths that would deliver the desired results more effectively.

Specifically, I wonder if we might distill and catalyze a narrative of life—the one universal and transcendent factor we all share—and then invite all religions to determine for themselves how

their principles and practices might grow in alignment with life's core tendencies and requirements. After all, the larger aim of the initiative Karlberg describes is to encourage religions—and their followers—to act with greater reverence and responsibility for all life. And ultimately, that is the nature of the Great Transition that is needed. Enabling life to thrive is not currently the explicit intention of most human endeavors; instead, we generally set our sights on lesser goals. Perhaps it should be no surprise, then, that what we're creating is something decidedly less than life thriving. So what if a narrative were to be generated around serving life, around the clear intention to create the conditions for life to thrive, in a movement that might be called "thrivability"? And then what if religious groups were invited to explore the role each might choose to play in that overarching quest?

The connection ought to be natural. There is inherent spirituality in any meaningful exploration of what enables aliveness and thriving: life seems to rely on "a Source, a First Cause, a Supreme Animating Will or Power," as Karlberg mentions. And there is a level at which humanity—and all creation—constitute "an organic oneness." Within a narrative of thrivability, there is also clear practicality: certain basic conditions are needed if life is to thrive, and our religions can be invited to support and cultivate those. By "basic conditions," I don't mean specific chemical processes or nutritional inputs. I mean the limited number of general characteristics that can be found in any living system—in our bodies, in sea sponges, in ant colonies, in rain forests, even in communities and organization—and that are required if the living system is to thrive. Though there isn't broad agreement among scientists about the specific set of conditions that are needed, I'll share below the four that my colleagues and I refer to in our work with organizations and communities.

First, all living systems are made up of individual parts—cells in your body, bees in a hive, people in organizations and communities. We know from the concept of biodiversity that, if the living system is to be resilient, adaptive and creative, the contributions of those parts must be as diverse as possible. In human communities and organizations, this means that we need to invite and enable diverse contributions from the people involved.

Second, in living systems, those diverse parts are connected to each other in a dynamic relationship. If the system is to thrive, those relationships must be supported by strong but flexible infrastructure. In your body, this is your skeletal, digestive, and circulatory systems, and more. In human communities, it is

the supportive structures and connective systems that allow us to be in responsive relationship with each other and with the world around us.

In all living systems, parts come together in relationship in service of an emergent level of life—a convergent whole that has characteristics and capabilities that can't be found at the level of the parts. In your body, this is you—and you are so much more than just a collection of cells. You think, and you feel, and you move—and these are not properties of your individual cells. This emergence of new capabilities is the generative promise of living systems. In human communities, it is enabled by a compelling shared purpose that draws people together and transforms them from a shapeless crowd into a vibrant living ecosystem capable of concerted effort and collective intelligence. This is where we have the direct experience of being part of something larger than ourselves.

Finally, what sets the process in motion is the spark of life—the Source, First Cause, or Supreme Animating Will that Karlberg describes. It is this property that enables the system to integrate parts into wholeness, that powers the emergence of new capabilities, and that enables self-healing, self-organization and self-creation. Acknowledging the presence of this animating force invites us to see ourselves not as mechanics and engineers of our communities and organizations but as stewards or gardeners, creating the fertile conditions for life to thrive. It invites us to participate in life's unfolding process with a sense of reverence and responsibility.

Acknowledging this fourth characteristic is in no way disenfranchising, as past religious claims of a guiding "higher power" have often been. Instead, it seems more appropriate to speak of an inner and at the same time all-encompassing essence or property. It seems more accurate to speak of our active and increasingly conscious participation in a wise living system that is learning along the way, as it seeks to connect to itself in novel ways. And each of us represents an infinite source of novelty.

What we learn from this exploration of the conditions life requires is that the underlying tendency and urge of all life is to connect with other life to create emergent, transcendent forms. It's what Lebanese poet Khalil Gibran calls "life's longing for itself." And this search for self-transcendence is what drives us to create families, organizations, communities—and religions.

In fact, the four core conditions described here are probably the same ones that Karlberg's proposed discourse would identify—honoring all forms of life, weaving respect and sacredness into our

relationships, being in service and stewardship of something beyond ourselves, and living with a sense of reverence for the animating force of life. Indeed, the scientific characteristics of living systems may be said to mirror the trinity found in many major religions.

Offering religion a new and yet resonant lens from outside itself—and perhaps from a less controversial base—might have an effect similar to Copernicus' discovery that the Earth is not at the center of the solar system: it might serve as an invitation to religions to explore how they will integrate that new perspective and new context into their existing belief systems and practices. Such an understanding of the nature of life might comfortably open the door to discussions about how any particular religious group can invite people individually and collectively into a stance of wise, compassionate, and reverent stewardship of life.

About the Author

Michelle Holliday is a facilitator, consultant, researcher, and writer. Through her company (Cambium), she brings people together and helps them discover ways they can feel more alive, connect more meaningfully with each other, and serve life more powerfully through their work. Often, this involves accompanying pioneering organizations as they craft a bold manifesto and then design the ways they will live into it. Her work centers around thrivability—a set of beliefs, intentions and practices based on a view of organizations as living systems. As part of the worldwide Art of Hosting community of practice, she hosts public conversations and workshops. Michelle regularly shares her perspectives on thrivability in a blog called *The Solarium*. Her latest book is *The Age of Thrivability: Perspectives and Practices for a Thriving World* (2015).

Carolyn Raffensperger

I want to offer a very different perspective on religion given my apprenticeship to various Indigenous peoples in the United States. I am most familiar with Puebloan and Apachean religious systems.

This paragraph in Michael Karlberg's essay is my starting point for laying out religious frameworks that are morally mature: "Similarly, if there is a transcendent spiritual reality, then it, too, must be one reality. Therefore, religion, if it is understood as the means by which we systematically investigate that reality, must be understood as one global enterprise. Stated another way, science reached a stage of relative maturity only when it began to free itself from culturally inherited biases and limitations. Why should religion be any different? And how can the transition to a more peaceful, just, and sustainable global order be possible unless and until the vast majority of human beings on this planet, who remain religious, begin to redefine their understanding of religion in this way?"

Most of the world's religions have been separated from their place of origin. They became almost exclusively transcendent and sky-based. In contrast, the Apache and tribes like the Zuni or Hopi are place-based. Their history, their moral codes, their holy beings are tied to the land. They have worked out what I have called morally mature cultures by grounding their religions in the ecosystems of their homelands. They have a code for how to relate to each other as humans and how to relate to the land based on the limits and nature of the world around them. Their religions aren't just sky-based, but mountain, river, scorpion, deep Earth, bear, snake and fish-based. This is not a universal spiritual reality. How could it be? The desert southwest is entirely different than the Northwest Coast rainforest or the prairies of North Dakota. The expression of religions must become place-based rather than universal. The celebrations, rights of passage, honoring of death and birth must be tailored to the living, breathing watersheds, migratory pathways, climate, and mega and micro-fauna of specific places.

Having said that, holding the world's dominant religions accountable is an altogether other matter and a worthy task.

About the Author

Carolyn Raffensperger is Executive Director of the Science and Environmental Health Network. In 1982, she left a career as an archaeologist in the Southwestern United States to join the environmental movement. As an environmental lawyer, she specializes in the fundamental changes in law and policy necessary to protect public health and the environment. She is best known for her work on the precautionary principle and developing a legal framework to assert the rights of future generations to a habitable planet. Carolyn is co-editor of *Precautionary Tools for Reshaping Environmental Policy* (2006) and *Protecting Public Health and the Environment: Implementing the Precautionary Principle* (1999).

Paul Raskin

Hardly surprisingly, this debate about religion, spirituality, science, and meaning has revealed a spectrum of strongly-held and incommensurate perspectives. The discussion provides an interesting test of an old GTI tenet—"the politics of trust"—that holds that a diverse community can tolerate significant differences, yet pursue together the common aim of transformation. Let me test the hypothesis a little further.

I think we can stipulate several things. First, since the scientific revolution, the boundaries of reality amenable to rational explanation have been expanding rapidly. Second, the ontological turf claimed by religion has correspondingly shrunk as natural explanations for phenomena displace attributions of divine cause. Third, a vast realm remains beyond the ken of contemporary science that, even though it will certainly shrink, may never vanish.

Different sensibilities fill that terra incognita in different ways. The religiously inclined claim it for a higher intelligence that intervenes in the material world, perhaps continually or perhaps not, perhaps sending a divine messenger into the corporeal realm (perhaps more than one). Others opt for a more amorphous, non-interventionist spirituality, often of a highly individual character. Still others (I'm one of them) don't take human limits of understanding as evidence for the supernatural. Rather, we come to terms with the fact that there's lots of stuff that our limited brains do not know (even as enhanced by the cumulative power of scientific understanding), and may never know, all the while working hard to reduce ignorance.

From this perspective, Karlberg's claim that science (rooted in a skeptical stance toward knowledge claims and subject to empirical refutation) and religion (rooted in faith) have a kindred epistemological status is not persuasive. He defends that equation by adopting an extreme form of sociology of scientific knowledge that emphasizes the way science reflects ideology (which it does to some, but only some, extent), while downplaying the essence of the scientific enterprise

that distinguishes it from faith—repeatable experiments and observations in which nature serves as a referee for contending claims. This inter-subjective (i.e., objective) scientific method is what fosters consensus and provides a basis for a cumulative scientific culture.

Finally, I want to reassure those who argue that a religious orientation is needed to truly give life meaning and purpose that the wonder of cosmic evolution, the majesty of life on our small planet, the intricacies of nature, and the eons of toil and struggle for human survival, justice, culture, and knowledge – and dreams of a flourishing future – provide a powerful foundation for living with meaning and purpose.

About the Author

Paul Raskin is the founding president of the Tellus Institute. The overarching theme of Dr. Raskin's work has been the development of visions and strategies for a transformation to more resilient and equitable forms of social development. Toward this larger aim, his research has spanned issues (energy, water, climate change, ecosystems, and sustainable development) and spatial scales (local, national, and global). He has conceived and built widely-used models for integrated scenario planning for energy (LEAP), freshwater (WEAP), and sustainability (PoleStar). Dr. Raskin has published widely, and served as a lead author for the U.S. National Academy of Science's Board on Sustainability, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, the Earth Charter, and UNEP's Global Environment Outlook. In 1995, he convened the Global Scenario Group to explore the requirements for a transition to a sustainable and just global civilization. The Group's 2002 valedictory essay – *Great Transition: The Promise and Lure of the Times Ahead* – became the point of departure for the Great Transition Initiative that Dr. Raskin launched in 2003 and continues to direct. Earlier in his career, Dr. Raskin received a PhD in Theoretical Physics from Columbia University in 1970.

Steven Rockefeller

In order to make the transition to a just, sustainable, and peaceful planetary civilization, the human species needs the inspiration and guidance of the world's great moral and spiritual traditions. Regarding organized religion, its support for a Great Transition can make a critical difference. However, mobilizing widespread religious support will require ongoing reconstruction of religious thought, including acceptance of a new worldview that integrates spiritual and moral values with scientific understanding. Further, in the twenty-first century, the religions should be held to account regarding the consequences of their teachings and behavior, as Karlberg argues, just as corporations and governments are held accountable. How to do this effectively, however, is a complicated question. In considering the merits of Karlberg's proposal for fostering and encouraging the "ongoing evolution and refinement of religion," first of all, it is instructive to put his recommendations in historical perspective.

For over two hundred years, the liberal tradition in religious thought has endeavored to reconcile religion with reason, science, and modern culture, and liberals have often sought to make religion an instrument of progressive social change. Karlberg's essay is to be understood as part of this tradition, which has had wide influence but which has also consistently met strong resistance from conservatives. Most liberals have focused on reconstructing the thought and practice of one tradition. Some religious liberal thinkers have argued that all the great religious traditions are different paths to the summit of one mountain, and at the summit the great mystics all find one Truth. In addition, there have been a number of liberals—G. W. F. Hegel, the nineteenth century German philosopher, being a prime example—who have argued for the view that the world's religions are evolving toward an ideal form of religion. Hegel identified that form with his rationalized concept of Christianity. John Macquarrie, a twentieth century Protestant theologian, maintained that each religion in its own culturally distinct way is evolving toward one universal ideal form. Karlberg appears to be presenting a novel variation on the theme of pathways up one

mountain and evolution toward one ideal form with special reference to a Great Transition to a global community.

Karlberg wants us to focus "for analytical purposes, on religion as a singular, universal, trans-historical phenomenon" rather than on the many, different, competing religions. He proposes that we conceptualize religion as one great "evolving system of knowledge and practice that, like science, entails a collective human endeavor to generate insights into reality and apply those insights to the betterment of the human condition." In addition, he argues that what is needed is "a set of rational, cosmopolitan standards" for harmonizing religion in relation to the emergence of a just and sustainable global community. These normative standards, which provide a vision of the ideal form of religion, can, then be used to assess religious thought and practice and "hold religion to account."

In what follows, I have the following comments, questions, and recommendations regarding Karlberg's proposal:

1. Finding ways to foster and encourage the further evolution of the world's religions is a necessary task if humanity is to find its way to a just, sustainable, and peaceful future. The formation of a planetary civilization is itself the major force driving the further evolution of religion today. The emergence of a world community and the new scientific understanding of the biosphere as a global ecosystem are generating a new global spiritual and ethical consciousness. This new global consciousness reflects increasing social and ecological interdependence and is a manifestation of the animating spirit of a just, sustainable, and peaceful world community. Many of the people affected by this development are not themselves involved in an institutional religion. If the world's religions are to remain vital centers of spiritual and moral guidance in the twenty-first century, they must open themselves to be transformed by this new global spiritual awareness.

2. Karlberg's conceptualization of the whole field of religion as one "evolving system of knowledge and practice" is a very general description of religion that requires clarification, and it does not provide an adequate definition of what lies at the heart of religion as a distinct dimension of human experience. One problem is that Karlberg's formulation tends to blur the distinction between religion and science. He argues that they are similar in that they both involve a collective search for knowledge. Karlberg identifies religious knowledge with religious insight, and he acknowledges that religious insight is very

different from scientific knowledge. This leaves the reader asking how he defines knowledge. How are scientific knowledge and religious insight related?

3. The religions are not really organized like the sciences, and they do not involve a search for knowledge in the scientific sense. What one can assert is that the world's great religions are part of the human search for spiritual and moral wisdom and, at their best, offer culturally diverse pathways to healing, wholeness, right relationship, and inner peace. Insofar as they are faithful to their highest ideals, they are evolving systems of spiritual wisdom and practice.

4. Karlberg calls for a shift in how we understand religion that "requires us to start separating religion conceptually, from the cultural milieus in which specific religions emerged." This may be an interesting intellectual exercise, but it raises some red flags. Respect for cultural diversity is a fundamental principle for building a just and peaceful global community. The idea of promoting a rational conception of religion in abstraction from the cultural contexts in which religion actually exists will sound to many religious leaders like a kind of liberal intellectual imperialism. Clarification is needed on how Karlberg understands the relevance and significance of cultural diversity in connection with his theory of religious evolution and refinement.

5. The conceptualization of the religious life as a search for knowledge, or more specifically and accurately, for moral and spiritual wisdom, is consistent with classical Greek, neo-platonic, Buddhist, and liberal perspectives among others. I support it, but it is important to recognize that, by and large, conservatives in traditions like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam put more emphasis on faith in divine revelation than on the human search for wisdom. The difference between these two orientations cannot be overcome simply by asserting that faith in revelation is a form of religious insight or knowledge. Further, conservatives in the great theistic traditions, as a general rule, do not think of revelation as ongoing. They look to the past, to ancient scripture, and not to the future, for moral and spiritual inspiration and guidance. For this reason, it will be difficult to engage conservatives in Karlberg's project as currently formulated.

6. There is some good news. An immense amount of scholarly work has been completed on what must be done to reconstruct the various religious traditions so that they become forces of progressive social change in the twenty-first century. For example, several hundred books have been written analyzing

what must be done in the way of reconstructing the world's great religions in order to fully integrate environmental values into their thinking and practice.

7. The most promising approach to advancing the reconstruction of religious thought and practice and the best way to go about holding religions accountable is to focus first and foremost on an appeal to ethical values, which involves a discourse that all the religions can identify with and readily understand. The religions can reasonably be called upon to act in ways consistent with high ethical standards. More specifically, in the twenty-first century the teachings and conduct of the religions should be assessed using the principles of the new emerging global ethic. The content of this ethic is already well developed. Three documents are of special significance in this connection: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Earth Charter, and the "Declaration Toward a Global Ethic" drafted under the leadership of the Christian theologian, Hans Kung, and adopted by the Parliament of the World's Religions in 1993. The "Declaration Toward a Global Ethic" is especially significant because it was drafted by a network of religious leaders and scholars and has been widely endorsed by religious leaders from many traditions. Awareness of the "Declaration Toward a Global Ethic" should be promoted, and it could well be used to hold religious leaders and institutions to account. It provides a good description of what Karlberg calls "the progressive and constructive practice of religion." If the world's religions were to take the principles of this Declaration to heart together with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Earth Charter, which both have been widely endorsed by religious organizations, they would become major forces for a Great Transition.

8. The idea of holding "religion to account" in the way that corporations and governments are held to account is an engaging one. External monitoring and pressure on the world's religions applied by United Nations agencies and secular NGOs may have some impact, but real lasting change will only come with prophetic leadership from within the religions. Each tradition can benefit from an internal dialogue on global ethics and the Great Transition. Over the last four decades, interreligious dialogue has been expanding and deepening and it has great promise as an instrument for promoting the evolution of religious thinking and practice. The education and training being provided to the future leaders of the world's religions is, of course, of vital importance.

About the Author

Steven Rockefeller is a Professor Emeritus of Religion at Middlebury College, where he also served as dean of the College. He received his Master of Divinity from Union Theological Seminary in New York City and his PhD from Columbia University. He is the author of *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism* (1991) and the co-editor of two books of essays, *The Christ and the Bodhisattva* (1987) and *Spirit and Nature: Why the Environment is a Religious Issue* (1992), and his essays have appeared in many books and journals. Over the past twenty years, Professor Rockefeller has played a leading role in the drafting and promotion of the Earth Charter, which is a declaration of global interdependence with fundamental principles for building a just, sustainable, and peaceful world. Active in the field of philanthropy, he is a trustee of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, an international foundation that he chaired from 1998 to 2006.

Richard Rosen

Like Michael Karlberg, I believe that "a critical normative discourse on the contemporary role of religion is urgently needed." But, as a secular atheist, I come to this from a different perspective, and with a different motivation.

Karlberg's essay is not really clear about what religion is, or how it differs from science on one hand and ethics and morality on the other. As a secular person, I do not believe that religion should be considered, to use Karlberg's expression, a "system of knowledge." If we take knowledge to involve statements about the real word which are justifiably true (the standard philosophical definition of knowledge), then science is the only true system of knowledge. Ethics and morality, then, are also not systems of knowledge since they are matters of opinion which are neither "true" nor "false."

To begin, then, it is very important to clearly distinguish among the three major types of belief systems (systems of meaning) that exist in the world today:

(1) Science: a justified belief system about what is the case—what is true about the physical world.

(2) Ethics and morality: beliefs about what ought to be the case—about how people ought to live their lives and how they ought to relate to each other in a wide variety of circumstances that arise in their lives.

(3) Religion: belief about one or more supernatural beings or forces that can act in and influence events in the physical world, but which cannot be explained in terms of scientific theories. This can take the form of belief in "a Source, a First Cause, a Supreme Animating Will or Power" or belief in a "transcendent meaning or purpose" to humanity.

Contrary to Karlberg, then, I do not think that science and religion are at all similar types of knowledge systems, since the concept of knowledge does not apply to religious beliefs. In

my opinion, it is not correct, as Karlberg claims, "to conceptualize religion as an evolving system of knowledge and practice that, like science, entails a collective human endeavor to generate insights into reality." For one thing, the compelling nature of most scientific theories about the world, which describe scientifically established truths about the world, tends to lead to greater and greater agreement among scientists over time, in large part because these theories can be tested and confirmed, often to very high degrees of quantitative accuracy. (Of course, there are some scientific theories, like astrophysical theories, that can be used to make predictions, but where actual tests cannot be carried out by creating alternative universes at different stages of development from the one we inhabit.)

Moreover, I do not understand the basis for Karlberg's claim that science is in "a relative state of systemic crisis." He says that the basis for his claim is his analysis of the political economy of how science is done. But while I am totally sympathetic with much of what he says about the potentially negative aspects of how science is done and which institutions support most research, that does not mean that science (scientific theories) have themselves become significantly bankrupt. Karlberg may implicitly be criticizing the way in which technology is being used in the modern world, not science, but I cannot tell. It would be helpful to hear more from him on this issue.

It is true that a very wide range of religious beliefs have existed for a long time and continue to persist in the world. But their persistence does not indicate anything about their truthfulness or status as knowledge, as Karlberg seems to imply. Furthermore, while Karlberg hopes to have a wide range of religious beliefs blend and evolve into a more uniform set of religious beliefs for various reasons, he is never really clear what those final set of beliefs would be, and exactly how they would differ from, and go beyond, ethics and morality.

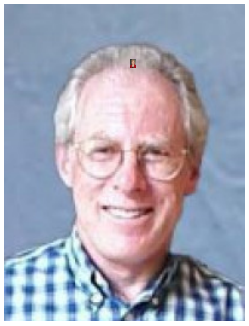
It is important to note that religions and religious institutions have always played a major role in most, if not all, societies in helping to develop what desirable moral beliefs for people to have would be and, therefore, for how people should organize themselves and behave towards others in their cultures. This role of religious institutions can often be positive because they contribute to our collective sense of what are desirable ethical and moral values. However, it is not uniformly positive: religious prescriptions such as "God says that women should play a subordinate role in society" undermine the ethical views that many other religious and secular people hold dear.

I think it is critical to emphasize that if a religion does not support the belief that some sort of supernatural being or force exists that can actually affect what happens in the physical world, then it is not a religion, but merely a set of ethical or moral precepts. However, I suspect that many people who consider themselves religious, in some sense of that word, primarily enjoy meeting with others in a religious institution because of the useful discussions of shared moral and ethical precepts that occur in that community. But many such people probably reject any concept such as a God, or a supernatural force that actually exists, as evidenced by its ability to influence real life events in the world. One reason for many people, such as myself, not to believe in some concept of the existence of a God, or other supernatural force that acts in the physical world, is that there has never been any clear history of evidence for such an entity or force that has been generally acknowledged as relevant to such an existence claim.

Finally, with respect to Karlberg's claim that humanity has some sort of purpose or meaning or innate goals (his various teleological claims), it is easy to understand psychologically why many people would hold such beliefs, but it is hard to understand the rational basis for his making such claims, in part given the fact that different religions have very different visions of such purposes or goals. But, again, one would need to be clear about how such a purpose or set of goals somehow went beyond, and was different from, simply believing in various moral or ethical goals that human societies should try to achieve. Religious people may feel that religious beliefs are true, and comprise a system of knowledge, but feeling this way does not make it so.

In contrast, the fact that many of us who are secular also strive towards a great transition can be easily explained by the fact that humans are intelligent, moral, and altruistic creatures, in addition to sometimes being egoistical. Ethics and morality, along with "the powers of love, compassion, and justice," are sufficient to "motivate the struggle and sacrifice required to bring it [a GT] about." These aspects of human behavior are not strictly speaking components of religion, and one should not invoke religion, or "spiritual forces," as the basis for these well-known human traits which are shared with secular people. Clearly, most if not all secular people accept the positive value of these kinds of human traits for the process of trying to make the world a better place.

About the Author



Richard Rosen is a former Fellow and founding board member of the Tellus Institute. He has thirty-five years of experience in energy sector resource planning and management, as well as environmental compliance. In the 1990s, Dr. Rosen's research has focused on the economics and feasibility of restructuring and deregulating the electricity utility industry. In a wide variety of regulatory and public planning settings, he has presented detailed analyses of alternative energy supply options, renewable resources, environmental impacts, energy efficiency technologies, and integrated electric power plans. His current research focus is on alternative economic visions and models for the global economy over the long-term, including new approaches to the allocation of capital needed for sustainability and the regulation of investments. He holds a PhD in Physics from Columbia University.

Bruce Schuman

Michael Karlberg's essay on meaning and religion is a brave and visionary statement set in the context of an immense and extended process of cultural evolution. The intellectual forces that bulwark his thesis extend throughout history, and in recent years have surged across a complex interdisciplinary spectrum that struggles to authentically interconnect traditionally disparate elements of human thinking.

The broad questions of "semiotics" and "codes" open up a wide array of profound issues in epistemology and semantics and psychology. In the context of a transition to planetary civilization, how can our emerging knowledge in these areas help us interpret the traditional meaning of religion, and help release its beneficial guiding influence into our shared context? As Karlberg asks in his essay, how can we "foster and encourage the ongoing evolution and refinement of religion" and "recognize it as a partner in a growing global citizens' movement?"

Answers to these questions have been growing in the context of the Great Transition for many years, and in this comment, I want to sketch out a review of this growing perspective.

In 1977, presenting the core thesis of his book "Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity" in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, and considering the full spectrum of human understanding, pioneering anthropologist and social scientist Gregory Bateson asked the question "What is the pattern that connects?" and suggested a detailed answer. There is a comprehensive wholeness in reality, said Bateson, that can be known by intuition, conceptualized by religion, and explicitly articulated by science. Extending Bateson's theme in 1988, theologian Matthew Fox interpreted this pattern in religious terms as the "Cosmic Christ," and today global philosopher and ontologist Dr. Ashok Gangadean unfolds this all-inclusive idea as the concept of "Logos."

In 1934, Professor Arthur Lovejoy provided foundation for this perspective, building on the entire history of western philosophy and religion in his landmark book "The Great Chain of Being," seeing this ancient concept as an interconnecting pattern across all the levels of human thinking. Contemporary writers on religion including Huston Smith and Ken Wilber have extended this thesis, seeing the Great Chain as the core principle connecting empiricism/science and intuition/religion and unfolding this idea throughout their studies in theology and psychology. Similarly, cyberneticians and whole system theorists offer related models of systemic change based on the interconnectivity and interdependence of all facets of the individual human mind or of entire societies.

All of these elements today are part of a vast and complex global conversation many thinkers see as a process of evolutionary co-creation, where facets of science and intuition from all across the spectrum of the human mind are drawn together in ways some believe are headed for grand synthesis or convergent conjunction. Writers and visionaries around the world are combining elements from religion, science, art, politics, and governance, crossing traditional boundaries and proposing innovative new doctrines that embody all of these things at once—in ways that are fully interdependent and interconnected, highly interdisciplinary, and intended to be scientifically credible.

Are we heading towards a true "theory of everything," a true conjunction of science and religion that could reliably influence democratic governance? This creative global inquiry all around us is the context of the Great Transition Initiative, and provides an intellectual background for Karlberg's essay. I especially admire Karlberg's contribution because he succinctly surveys the history of this broad issue from the point of view of a faithful advocate, and while recognizing the historical vulnerabilities and weaknesses of religion—what Bateson called its "epistemological errors"—he defends its basic authenticity and its vitalizing influence on the most successful societies throughout history.

In this defense, Karlberg joins a chorus of voices calling for a revolution in integral and holistic thinking, outlining with care an array of critical issues that must be approached with balance and precision if the vulnerabilities of religion are not to disqualify its role and influence in the public square. A theme that repeats itself throughout the Karlberg essay is the phrase "organic oneness," which can be understood as a primary meme or archetypical concept of his perspective. Mystical writers, theologians from many traditions, scientists, humanists, and holistic philosophers, and a burgeoning global movement

of religious and "interspiritual" people, all can converge their thinking towards a common and shared framework through this concept of "oneness."

If there is a legitimate candidate for an "overarching interpretive frame" that can help integrate the Great Transition, it is this theme of oneness. From a religious and theological point of view, oneness can be seen as the core idea of religion itself, a universal expression or definition of the Godhead, as seen through a wide variety of independent traditions. In Matthew Fox's terms, the "Cosmic Christ" is oneness. From Ashok Gangadean's point of view, oneness is the Logos and the essence of rationality itself. From the point of view of holistic philosophy or the theory of categories, or an integral cognitive science, oneness is the container, the universal conceptual framework within which all philosophy and science are held.

Seen through the lens of a spirit-guided social-change activism, intended to combine the beneficial influences of a wide variety of religious and spiritual and secular humanist perspectives into a common global ethics, oneness seems a potent candidate for a kind of universal "intercultural bridge abutment"—a neutral center-point and common origin for a global-scale co-creative process intended to bring together contending forces from across the full spectrum of human experience.

Are the religions of the world "semiotic codes" for interpreting the meaning of oneness in a particular social or historical context? Are they an interpretive bridge across the levels of the mind, extending in some particular culturally adaptive way from the transcendent and supremely holy into the immediate lives of their followers? Are the religions of the world different from one another because they arise under different conditions, in response to a different human need? This is the general thesis of the "perennial philosophy", and seeing religions in these terms opens pathways to constructive negotiation and understanding among religious adherents. Understood in this way, the thesis of oneness as universal common ground opens the way to a sophisticated process of negotiation and mediation that sustains and nurtures the role of religion in the world, in a context that enables mutual respect and constructive engagement. If a global ethics can be fused from interpretations across the entire range of human thinking, the "organic oneness" of humanity becomes the container for the entire co-creative conversation, finding a place for every voice. Oneness itself becomes an innate moral imperative.

In the context of social theory and evolution, oneness seems to be the essential theme in the definition

of "community." Yes, we are diverse; yes, we are different; yes, there are many points where we disagree. But yes, we are one community; yes, we can work this out together; and yes, we can explicitly identify common ground. Oneness is the core idea for an "E Pluribus Unum" approach to global-scale interreligious encounter, where innumerable and distinct traditions and their adherents might feel called and welcomed to a collective process of constructive engagement from the particular point of view of their own local culture or religious tradition. In the context of the Great Transition Initiative, the principle of community and the co-creative power of diversity-in-unity are essential guiding principles for synthesizing a new global order that works for everyone.

In his carefully written yet passionate essay, Michael Karlberg makes an important contribution to the Great Transition Initiative. By capably defending the ancient vision of religion, and honoring its vitalizing role throughout history, Karlberg offers a strong challenge to doubters and skeptics who may be too quick to dismiss the critical role of holistic intuition in guiding the most successful societies throughout history. We are living today through profoundly co-creative and revolutionary times, drawing together not only the entire range of interreligious and interspiritual voices, but also the passionate concerns of humanists and scientists and social change activists, all responding to a myriad of complex interdependent issues that threaten local and global well-being.

Karlberg's essay is a call to remember the pattern that connects—a remembrance that might help bind us together as one family, one global community, in the context of one integral conversation. Concluding his essay, Karlberg invites us all into continuing engagement and relationship, in ways that might reasonably hope to convene the full energies of collective human wisdom, releasing this enlightening influence into the challenging context shared by all of us today in the context of the Great Transition.

About the Author

Bruce Schuman is an Internet systems developer and database programmer with a background in cognitive science and epistemology. His interests include interfaith and intercultural understanding and the relationship of science and religion. In the context of global transition, he wants to explore the development of integral and cross-sector networks that can interconnect traditionally independent elements of human thinking. Bruce believes that the process of globalization is driving the emergence of universal ideas, perhaps including an emerging new "integral paradigm" that defines the complete spectrum of human understanding within a single framework.

Mimi Stokes

For me, the core religious issue for the Great Transition is how religion influences and shapes our ideas of Agency, especially and pointedly Tragic Agency.

We are having a difficult time trying to get across that humans are the cause of the cosmic catastrophe of climate change and the Sixth Great Extinction. The religious idea of a supreme being who is "Source, a First Cause, a Supreme Animating Will or Power" is one reason why climate science has such a hard time making its case for human causality. If a supreme divine power is the cause of everything, then religion becomes the meaning-making system that legitimizes God as the sole source and cause of climate change and religion drives climate denial.

The religious idea of a Supreme Source that is 'behind' (for lack of a better word) "every aspect of the reality we experience" unhappily serves to make "the reality" of climate change just as divinely sourced as all reality is believed to be, indirectly granting legitimacy through First Cause religious epistemology to Texas Governor Rick Perry's declaration that the BP oil spill was "a tragic act of god." Of course, it was no such thing; it was a tragic act by a Corporate Human named "Halliburton" (who, I fear, believes he is God...). In this absurd case, the religious principle of First Cause morphs into a "religious convenient truth" that serves to exculpate all human 'actors' (especially The Corporate Human Actor) from responsibility for the catastrophe of climate change. All Tragic Agency goes to God (along with All Agency), conveniently getting tragic human actors off the hook.

The flip side is that, if only a divine cosmic force and/or creator God has tragic agency on a cosmic scale, then it 'logically' follows that only a divine creator God can save us from a tragic situation for which He, himself, is believed to be responsible.

Cue salvationist hopes and memes—and prayers—of being "saved" from this planetary tragedy of our own unintentional making. The hope of salvation from anguishing human experience is an

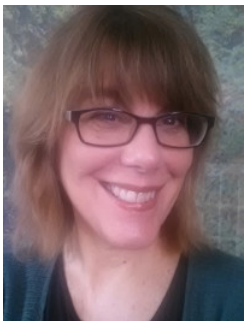
understandable hope, but a dangerous one if and when it leads to a fatal human failure to act.

If the core question is how religion can be a 'progressive rather than regressive' force for inspiring and motivating a global citizens movement, then religiously inclined global citizens must tackle the wicked problem of the religious influence of causal religious epistemology on ideas of Agency. We all answer the question, "What can I do?" based on our beliefs about Tragic Agency and salutary, salvationist, heroic Agency to transcend a tragic fate. If we believe that all that is up to God and we have no Agency either way, tragic agency or transcendent agency, then we have a problem.

The religious question I think we need to ask, and to answer, is: What are the ideas of Tragic Agency and Transcendent Agency we need to inspire and catalyze a global citizens movement to transcend our common, tragic fate of hurtling toward cosmic catastrophe by our own human actions, and how can the human spiritual impulse help foster those ideas?

For which my short answer is developing "the great inspiration" for the Great Transition that dignifies and legitimates any, and every, source of inspiration to act to minimize human suffering and maximize human courage, compassion, and creativity to create a planetary form of human civilization in which real living humans can, and want, to live and thrive.

About the Author



Mimi Stokes is an award-winning playwright who focuses on the intersection of sustainability and drama. She is a certified practitioner of playback theater, an improvisational community building method in which actors "play back" the real-life experiences of members of a community, dignifying individual emotional truths. She currently is developing *The Dran Model*, a drama-based theory and practice of cultural evolution and sustainable social change.

Author's Response

Response to Comments

I am very thankful to the Great Transition Initiative for inviting me to submit an essay exploring the constructive role that religion, as a system of meaning, might play in the transition to a more just and sustainable global order. I also appreciate the many thoughtful comments, questions, and constructive criticisms that emerged in response to the essay.

Across the entire discussion, there seemed to be widespread agreement that the search for viable systems of meaning is essential to the great transition—whether those systems are secular or religious. There also seemed to be fairly strong agreement that the movement toward a great transition cannot ignore religion and cannot fail to engage religious communities in some way, since billions of people on the planet today—including countless social and environmental activists—are religious.

There was also a reasonable amount of agreement with the essay's primary thesis that a critical normative discourse regarding religion, for the purpose of contributing to the ongoing evolution or transformation of religious thought and practice, is an important requisite of the great transition. In this context, a number of valuable suggestions were made regarding substantive aspects of that discourse. For instance, Mimi Stokes-Katzenbach pointed out the need to challenge modes of religious thought that rob people of a sense of agency in relation to pressing global problems.

There was also significant agreement that, if religions are to play a positive role in the great transition, they will need to internalize a consciousness of the oneness of humanity and translate this into practice on a global scale. Several voices suggested that the seeds of this consciousness are already present in most, if not all, religious traditions.

Not surprisingly, there were also some divergent perspectives expressed in the discussion. In response, I would like to focus my summary comments on two themes that clearly emerged.

Before doing so, it is important to note that we need not arrive at one "correct" way of thinking and talking about religion. As a general epistemological principle, it is now widely recognized that different conceptual frameworks can have validity within different domains of analysis. For instance, the frameworks of classical mechanics and quantum mechanics appear to have validity within different domains of physics. This epistemological principle is even more applicable in the analysis of complex social, cultural, and historical phenomena—including religion. Therefore, the comments below are offered in a spirit of collective inquiry, and readers are invited to consider the productive insights that might be gained from the framework they represent.

1. Should we focus on organized religion or individual spirituality?

The first theme I want to address is skepticism regarding organized religion and inclinations toward more individualized approaches to spirituality. These sentiments derive from valid and familiar concerns regarding abuses of power by religious institutions past and present—which were noted in the initial essay. It is easy to understand why such abuses lead many thoughtful people to reject organized religion altogether. However, an alternative approach, which the essay suggests, is to hold religious institutions to account, wherever possible, rather than rejecting them altogether.

If we reject all institutions that sometimes abuse power, then we would need to reject all secular institutions as well. No secular institution is free from abuses of power, and the scale of such abuse in the twentieth century has been staggering. This is why anarchists reject all forms of institutional authority. Yet the just and sustainable global order envisioned by GTI will not be achieved without institutional capacities—at the levels of both collective agency and institutional structure. In this regard, anarchism does not offer a coherent route through the great transition. Such a route also cannot be found in the extreme individualism or libertarianism of a Western civilization that is proving incapable of grappling with the collective challenges of global interdependence. A purely individualistic approach to spirituality can be seen as a reflection of this culture of individualism.

Individual spirituality can be viewed as a necessary but insufficient condition for the advancement of civilization. Institutional capacity is also necessary. As my initial essay documented, and as several respondents affirmed, most modern social movements have been driven in part by religious commitments and organizational capacities. In the US, where I currently live, it is doubtful that the abolition movement, the suffrage movement, or the civil rights movement would have advanced in the

time frames they did without organized religion as a central mobilizing force. Likewise, the institution of the modern university was a religious construct, originating initially through the organized practice of Islamic communities in Baghdad, Cairo, and other previously unsurpassed centers of learning. Similarly, consider the countless hospitals, orphanages, and other humanitarian endeavors of organized religion today. In my home city, there would not be a single hospital if it were not for organized religion—due in part to failures of the secular state—and the same is true for vast parts of the contemporary world, both North and South.

In the haste to dispense with organized religion, are people saying they would prefer to live in a world without these major progressive accomplishments and essential services? Furthermore, mobilization in the civil society sector requires organizational capacities linked to high ideals and a willingness to struggle for social change. Many religious communities have all of these in abundance, and thus, they have much to contribute to the great transition.

2. Can religions be understood as systems of knowledge?

The second theme I want to address emerged from various reservations regarding my suggestion that it is possible to conceptualize religion as an evolving system of knowledge and practice that, like science, entails a collective human endeavor to generate insights into reality and apply those insights to the betterment of the human condition. The discussion of this theme requires us to recognize, as alluded to above, that diverse conceptual frameworks can offer valid insights within different domains of analysis. With this in mind, I invite others to consider the possibility that the comments I offer below might have validity within a specific domain of analysis—even as apparently divergent comments from the online discussion might have validity within other domains.

Rich Rosen responded to the idea that religion can be understood as a system of knowledge by commenting "if we take knowledge to involve statements about the real world which are justifiably true (the standard philosophical definition of knowledge), then science is the only true system of knowledge." Though the first half of Rosen's statement glosses over complex unresolved debates in the field of epistemology and the philosophy of science—such as what constitutes "justifiably true"—I can accept the general sentiment. However, the second half of Rosen's statement embodies a very narrow conception of knowledge that may be applicable in some contexts but does not exhaust the productive ways that knowledge can be conceptualized.

For instance, when early humans learned how to make increasingly refined stone tools hundreds of thousands of years ago and used language to transmit this knowledge from one generation to another, would we call that science? Or would we dismiss it as invalid knowledge? Rosen's logic would require us to make this choice. Likewise, when a hunting and gathering society accumulates a complex body of knowledge regarding the nutritional and medicinal value of hundreds of species in its habitat, and successfully transmits that knowledge across generations, is that science or invalid knowledge? Similarly, when a population learns to successfully inculcate values and norms that enable it to survive and prosper for an extended period of time within a given social, ecological, and historical context, and it successfully transmits this knowledge from one generation to the next, is that science or invalid knowledge?

Diverse forms of valid knowledge have been widely recognized for centuries. For example, Greek philosophers distinguished between *episteme* (scientific knowledge), *techné* (technical knowledge), and *phronesis* (practical wisdom). Within this typology, Rosen asserts that episteme is the only valid form of knowledge in any context.

If we recognize that knowledge can take different forms depending on the mode or domain of analysis, and if we recognize the examples above as valid forms of knowledge, then we can see that science is not the only valid approach to the generation of knowledge—even though it is a very important approach. We can also see that other forms of knowledge are not inherently anti-scientific or opposed to science—they merely operate in different domains. Indigenous cultures clearly engaged in the generation and transmission of some forms of valid knowledge that we generally do not categorize as scientific. Early agriculturalists engaged in the generation and transmission of knowledge that we generally do not categorize as scientific. Guilds engaged in the generation and transmission of knowledge that we generally do not categorize as scientific. Is it so difficult, then, to conceptualize religious communities as protagonists in the generation and transmission of certain forms of knowledge—such as knowledge about how to foster virtue, altruism, and compassion? Or how to struggle against the pull of ego and self-centeredness? Or how to employ non-violent strategies in the pursuit of social justice?

Note that in my preceding comment, and in my initial essay, I am not referring to metaphysical or theological premises or assertions as "knowledge" (e.g., unprovable premises regarding the existence

or nature of God). I agree with Rosen if this is what he is rejecting as justifiably true knowledge. Indeed, I find debates over such metaphysical premises, including debates between atheists and theists, to be completely counter-productive and fruitless.

All knowledge systems, including every major research program in the natural sciences, rest on unprovable ontological premises of one kind or another—even though these premises can be obscured or forgotten within discourse communities that start to take them for granted over time. Ultimately, our confidence in such premises rises or falls in relation to how fruitful they are in generating practical knowledge. In this regard, when I speak of religious knowledge I am referring to practical knowledge about how to improve the human condition that rests on ontological premises regarding a spiritual dimension of reality. Ultimately, our confidence in such premises can only be assessed by how fruitful they prove to be. An objective reading of history suggests that such premises have indeed been quite fruitful in various contexts. The question before us is whether they will prove fruitful in the context of the transition to a more just and sustainable global order. And it is too early to pass judgment in this regard.

Steven Rockefeller, in his deeply insightful and engaging comments, asks how I am defining knowledge and states that my essay's "conceptualization of the whole field of religion as one 'evolving system of knowledge and practice' is a very general description of religion that requires clarification." I agree. This is why I included citations in my original essay that offer extensive elaborations of this theme—elaborations which were not possible for me to articulate in such a brief essay.

Rockefeller also suggests we might view religions not as evolving systems of knowledge and practice, but as "evolving systems of spiritual wisdom and practice." This thoughtful suggestion points toward a productive exploration of the nature of religious knowledge, or wisdom, and its potential role in a great transition. I hope this exploration will continue.

In the meantime, whether one uses the term *knowledge*, *wisdom*, or any other related term, it is important to recognize the way religious communities can, collectively and systematically, generate insights that contribute to the betterment of the human condition. In this regard, religious beliefs and practices, including those rooted in indigenous cultures, are not static museum artifacts (as some voices in the discussion seemed to imply). They are adaptive and dynamic phenomena that respond to changing social, ecological, and historical conditions. Granted, reactionary conservative impulses

can emerge within religious communities, and these certainly dominate much public discourse about religion today in the West. But the critical normative discourse on religion that is gradually expanding across the planet beckons thoughtful people to move beyond these reactionary impulses. And many people—especially among the younger generations—are proving eager to do so without abandoning their underlying religious commitments.

The great transition will require radical transformations of human thought and practice at many levels. Why should religion be exempt from this imperative? Why should religion, which has generated

valid forms of knowledge in the past, not become significantly more conscious, purposeful, and systematic about the generation of practical knowledge that helps us adapt to conditions of planetary interdependence?